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ABSTRACT

A study examined the usefulness of the instructional recommendations in basal reader program teachers' manuals for discussing race in multicultural stories. Three recently published basal reader series widely used in the Capital District of New York State were used in this analysis: Harcourt Brace (1995), Houghton Mifflin (1993), and MacMillan (1993). The study focused on readers for grade levels 4-6 and, in each, identified stories depicting people of color and determined whether race or ethnicity was mentioned and used in the manuals' suggestions to teachers for classroom learning activities. Results indicated that the Harcourt Brace manuals contained 18 stories with people of color for grades 4-6, but MacMillan contained almost twice as many like stories at those grade levels and offered teaching ideas 66% of the time. Houghton Mifflin contained the fewest number of stories portraying racial diversity (11) and only 18% of those lessons contained teaching ideas for discussing race or culture with children. A total of 64 stories were identified, but only 34 of the manuals' directed reading plans contained ideas for discussing race or culture. Findings reveal wide variability in the treatment of color and culture among the basal reading series, and text genre influenced the likelihood that a manual would offer teaching ideas for racial diversity. There was a marked tendency in all three basal programs to present the world in a more harmonious way than it actually is. (Contains 18 references.) (CR)

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Are the Teachers' Manuals in Basal Readers Helpful for Discussing Race in Multicultural Stories?

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper to be Presented an the Northeastern Educational Research Association, 27th Annual Conference, October 23-25, 1996 Ellenville, New York

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Basal reader programs are widely used in most elementary classrooms (Hoffman, 1994). This remains so even after a decade of spirited advocacy for whole language and literature-based instruction (Goodman, 1988; Goodman,1989; Weaver, 1994), and widespread as well as long-term dissatisfaction with the kinds of stories contained in basal readers (Reutzel and Larsen, 1995; Taxel, 1979). Although contemporary basals contain more stories portraying racial, cultural, and economic diversity than readers of years ago, we have wondered what kind of instructional recommendations are offered in the instructors' manuals for helping teachers discuss these issues with children.

A number of researchers have examined the usefulness of the instructional recommendations in basal manuals. Durkin (1984) found that manuals are unsystematic in their recommendations to teachers, offering too much advice where little is needed, or no advice when information would be helpful (Durkin, 1984). Similarly, Miller and Blumenfeld (1993) criticized basal manuals because their practice activities do not foster student comprehension of complex texts.

Other researchers have studied the impact basal manuals have on teacher decision-making. Barr and Sadow (1989) argued that teachers indiscriminately select activities from basal manuals keeping children

busy at their seats, regardless of the learning tasks' importance in learning to read. Barksdale & Ladd (1993) discovered that teachers reluctantly depended on basal reader manuals to satisfy classroom needs for skill instruction, grouping, and lesson pacing. And the most far reaching criticism is Shannon's (1987) who claims that basals "deskill" teachers, because they blindly follow basal manuals instead of constructing lessons to fit the literacy needs of their students.

At least one research study questions the findings of teacher reliance on basal manuals. Sosniak & Stodolsky (1993) argue that basal manuals have less influence on teachers' decision-making than others suggest. They have found that teachers vary in how they use manuals from one lesson to the next, sometimes disregarding the manuals' recommendations by developing their own directed reading lessons.

Purpose

In this study we examined contemporary basal reader manuals to learn the kinds of instructional recommendations they contain for teachers when discussing stories with people of color. Specifically, we examined the following questions:

- What instructional recommendations do basal reader manuals offer teachers when discussing stories containing African American,

Latino, Asian, and Native people?

- What are the implications of these findings for teacher educators as they prepare new teachers for racially diverse classrooms?

Method

Three basal reader series were used in this analysis of teacher manuals. All three, Harcourt Brace (1995) , Houghton Mifflin (1993), and MacMillan (1993), have been recently published and are widely used throughout the Capital District of New York State. Originally we intended to examine primary grade stories but soon realized readers for that level contained more fable and folk literature about animals and far fewer stories where persons were the protagonists. Consequently, we focused our research on fourth, fifth, and sixth grade level readers. Table I illustrates the number of stories containing people of color at each grade level from each series.

Table I

Number of Stories with People of Color in Each Basal Series

	Harcourt Brace	Houghton Mifflin	Macmillan
Grade 4	10	5	12
Grade 5	6*	6	6
Grade 6	12	**	17

* The second volume of HB basal for this grade has not been analyzed at the time of this draft.

** Not analyzed at time of this draft

Procedures

We began the study by examining each of the basal reader manuals to identify stories that depicted people of color in the text, title, or illustrations. Each story with persons of color was categorized according to racial and ethnic group depicted, its literary genre, and whether race or ethnicity was mentioned and used in the manuals' suggestions to teachers for classroom learning activities. We also counted stories about the Jewish diaspora as examples of minority literature, so Number the Stars by Lowry (1989), for example, was included in the table above.

We only analyzed major stories in the basals and did not include one-page anecdotes, poetry, or other supplemental texts that the basals contained. Harcourt & Brace and MacMillan, for example, contained one and two page segments, called "Multicultural Perspectives/Connections," which were supplementary to the full basal stories. We reasoned that because these supplemental texts were not integrated into the directions for the guided reading lessons, it would be less likely teachers would regularly use them in their instruction. Consequently, we didn't include them in this analysis.

Two researchers examined the basal manuals and cross-checked their analyses to assure consistency of findings. We categorized story

character's race as Caucasian, African or African American, Latino/a, Native American, and Asian. We did not use a biracial category although some of the illustrations might have been persons of mixed backgrounds. Sometimes the manuals would discuss cultural backgrounds of the story characters and we included activities that fostered children's cultural awareness as evidence that race was being discussed.

We used the term ethnicity to refer to cultural differences among people of the same race. For example, we identified story characters as Asian when their ethnicity might be Vietnamese, Korean, or Japanese.

In some cases we had knowledge of an original chapter book that was used in a basal, and in these cases we categorized the basal story according to the original book. Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1990), is an example of this. In the original story, Maniac, who is white, interacted with many African American friends, but the basal version selected a chapter where all story characters were white. That selection, we believed would falsely influence children's understanding of the original story's theme and problem. In addition, the basal reader company's selection of that particular episode suggests it wanted to avoid including a story where race was related to the theme.

Results

We learned that basal reading programs differ in their treatment of racial diversity. Some contain far more stories with people of color than others. The basal programs also vary in the frequency in which the manuals present teaching ideas about race and culture.

Some basals are far better at portraying the diversity of our racial and cultural landscape than others. Specifically, there is a great difference in the number of stories containing people of color from one basal series to the next. Harcourt and Brace's manuals contained 18 stories with people of color for grades 4, 5, and 6, but MacMillan contained almost twice as many stories with people of color (N=35) at those grade levels. Houghton Mifflin contained the fewest number of stories portraying racial diversity; that series presented only five stories at grade four and six stories at grade five containing people of color.

We also found a difference in the time in which a child would first encounter a story character of color. In some of the basals stories with people of color occurred in the very beginning of a reader, but in others, children would not see a character of color until well into the basal text as Harcourt Brace does in its sixth grade reader.

The three basal reading programs presented ideas for discussing race and culture of story characters only half (53%) of the time in which

people of color appeared. In other words, the instructional recommendations to teachers were color blind much of the time. Specifically, we identified a total of 64 stories containing people of color but only 34 of the manuals' directed reading plans contained ideas for discussing race or culture. Table 2 illustrates our findings.

Table 2: Number of Times Race or Color is Discussed in Teacher Manuals*

	Harcourt Brace	Houghton Mifflin	MacMillan
Grade 4	3/10	1/5	9/12
Grade 5	1/6**	1/6	3/6
Grade 6	5/12	***	11/17

* Fractional numbers are presented indicating number of stories where color is discussed above the total number of stories containing people of color

** The second volume of HB basal for this grade has not been analyzed at the time of this draft.

*** Not analyzed at time of this draft

A related finding of our analyses is that there was wide variability in the treatment of color and culture among the basal reading series. For example, Houghton Mifflin contained the fewest stories (11) with people of color and only 18% of those lessons contained teaching ideas for discussing race or culture with children. MacMillan contained three times (N=35) as many stories with people of color and offered teaching ideas about race or culture 2/3 of the time.

Text genre influenced the likelihood that a manual would offer

teaching ideas for discussing racial diversity. We found eight biographical stories in the three basal series, and all but one offered teaching ideas for discussing race and culture with children.

The most interesting findings from our analyses pertained to qualitative patterns in the basal manuals' treatment of race and culture. We learned that the manuals presented the world from the brightest of perspectives even when the stories contained the saddest of moments. This bias is seen in many of their immigrant stories. Typically the immigrant stories, which were in the basals, depicted America as a warm and accepting country, even when some immigrants faced prejudice and bigotry in original books. For example, prejudice and bigotry are portrayed in Mohr's (1987) original book Felita; Felita, a Puerto Rican girl, and her family move from one New York City neighborhood to a nicer one after the father obtains a better paying job. But in the new neighborhood they are faced with racial and cultural prejudice. MacMillan's selection from that chapter book, which is used in its fourth grade reader, does not contain the same social issues. Its manual suggests, "Discuss what adjustments might have been hard for Felita's older family members and what they might do to keep their Puerto Rican memories and heritage alive" (MacMillan manual, p. 205). Similarly, in Harcourt & Brace's sixth grade

story, "Hello, My Name is Scrambled Eggs," ideas for discussing cultural differences facing new Asian immigrants are presented, but bigotry and racism are not. And the same omission about prejudice appears in Harcourt & Brace's instructional recommendations for the sixth grade story, "The Vietnamese in America."

The basal reading programs avoided story episodes containing racial discord. Harcourt & Brace, for example, selected a minor episode about tying ropes in Maniac Magee when a central theme of the original text (Spinelli, 1992) was one of homelessness and people constructing friendships across racial boundaries. This tendency to brighten the dark side of human nature appeared in all three series and in many stories.

The Harcourt and Brace basal series euphemized the Holocaust. For example, as Jewish families hid from the Nazis in Lowry's (1989) Number the Stars, the H & B sixth grade manual suggests that children "...read to find out how Anne Marie and her family and friends cope with the hardships of wartime (Harcourt and Brace, teacher manual, p. 262)." This is a gross understatement to refer to the holocaust as a "wartime hardship" when an entire ethnic group was being deliberatly extinguished.

Discussion

Basal reading programs are known to present conservative and

status quo positions about reading education (Hoffman et al, 1994). Our study suggests that they also offer assimilation models of race and culture in this society. That is, to a large extent racial and cultural differences do not matter in basal reader stories. More often than not these basal manuals avoid discussions of social difference by selecting harmonious story episodes from original books and do not provide discussion ideas about race and culture when the topics emerged. In effect, basal reader manuals do not offer ideas for discussing race. This omission of race from stories and story discussions creates the illusion that it does not matter in our society.

Some would argue that race matters with children, their families and their communities. A parent in Vivian Paley's (1979) school explained the issue this way: "My children are black. They don't look like your children. They know they're black and we want it recognized. It's a positive difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about (Paley, 1979, p. 138)." A recent study by Jervis (1996) describes how at an alternate New York City school, with exceptional faculty dedicated to racial and social equity classroom discussions about racial difference and discord were avoided. When conflict occurred among children, and racial differences

appeared to underlie the incident, teachers overlooked and circumvented the issue, even when children requested it be discussed.

There was a marked tendency in all three basal programs to present the world in a more harmonious way than it actually is. This is evidenced in the number of times race and cultural differences are omitted from stories, and when racial and cultural conflict are minimized or treated euphemistically.

There are many implications to be drawn from our analyses. One, school districts should understand that basal series differ greatly in their treatment of racial and cultural diversity. If school districts desire large numbers of stories with children of color, they need to look closely because there is great variance among basal readers. Two, our findings have implications for teaching children about racial and cultural diversity. We believe that children need to learn at a young age to respect and value racial and cultural differences. As a group these basal readers will have little impact on children's respect for racial diversity because they only contain stories with people of color some of the time, and nearly half of that time the manuals offer few ideas for learning to respect social differences. Three, it behooves teacher education programs to present models of critical pedagogy to preservice and novice teachers. Teachers

need a critical pedagogy to help children acquire and evaluate knowledge presented to them in their classroom texts (Kanpol, 1995). Ignoring issues about race and diversity fosters an illusion that race is unimportant, when clearly it is of great significance given the racial and cultural boundaries we see in contemporary society. A critical pedagogy that would foster children's critical thinking would be an important contribution to school and social reform.

We know it is not easy talking about racial and cultural differences. In fact, talking about racial differences among people causes discomfort for most adults. We are not sure exactly how racial differences should be discussed in elementary schools, but we do believe that discussions must occur even in the primary grades.

Critics of our study might argue that classroom discussions about race should occur during social studies and not during reading time. That reasoning, we believe, is faulty in two ways: 1) Most classrooms are now integrating their instruction of the elementary subjects, and it is as likely for teachers to discuss social issues in reading and math as it is during social studies; 2) The heart of good literature is often the most controversial and awkward of topics. Eliminating discussions of race and culture from reading time is akin to homogenizing all cheese so they all

taste the same with nothing unique to offer the palate.

Spirit and passion of story are frequently embodied in the culture and race of the protagonists. These topics should be discussed with children. Denying social difference and conflict is an injustice to good literature and its readers. The consequence of such an ill-conceived scheme is to make reading unengaging for children. Furthermore, our multiracial society is in desperate need of a population that can critically read and sensitively discuss these social issues.

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